

# SELF-AUTHORING PRACTICES ACROSS LITERACY CONTEXTS: THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN READERS, TEXTS, AND DISCUSSANTS

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An increasing amount of attention has been paid to the ways in which classroom discussions shift in response to varying contextual conditions (Allen & Moller, 2009; Morrow & Smith, 1990) and group composition (Allen & Moller, 2009; Evans, 1997). Recently, researchers have suggested that the classroom might be a place to explore and develop both academic and social identities. Johnston (2012) argued the current focus on academics in schools “has blinded us to the fact that when children grow up, they are not only going to be wage earners. They are going to be citizens, parents, spouses, teachers, politicians, artists, managers and so forth” (p. 113). Thus, school is a place where children learn academics in addition to social and emotional competencies that will help them foster healthy and productive relationships in their lives outside the classroom walls.

Children have a myriad of opportunities to enact social identities as they interact with others in classroom settings. These enactments, also called self-authoring practices, can be viewed as a way to try out and try on different forms of communication and to see the effects of different approaches. As children become familiar with outcomes associated with particular ways of interacting, they will internalize those that feel most successful to them, allowing those behaviors to become segmented pieces of individual students’ identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). However, as a research community, we know little about the ways agentive enactment of student identities such as self-authoring shape the academic contexts in which they are displayed (Guiterrez, 1994). In this study, I aim to show data from two literature discussion contexts (whole group read-alouds and small groups) that demonstrate how children deliberately construct themselves as academic and social beings, while also highlighting the ways in which teachers might support these intentional,

identity-shaping approaches to communication. Specifically, the current study is a case study extracted from a larger data set that highlights the ways in which one student’s self-authoring practices shape the literacy contexts (whole group and small groups) in which he participated.

By following the interactive experience of one focal participant, Liam, the following research attempts to shed light on the following research questions: a) In what ways do children’s self-authoring practices implicate their identities and roles within and across literacy contexts in one classroom? b) How do individual self-authoring practices shape literacy contexts?

## CASE SELECTION

At the time of the study, Liam was a nine-year-old third grader in Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky’s class. He was the only child of a university professor, who was considered to be academically average. He made “good” grades (A’s and B’s) and had been successful (received passing scores) on state-mandated standardized assessments. However, Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky were not convinced that he performed at his full potential [Teacher Interview, February 28, 2013]. They specifically stated they believed he rushed through work in order to do things that were more interesting to him. Both teachers considered Liam to be “a reader,” and suggested that when he was interested in a topic, he would read about it for pleasure.

Outside of school, Liam participated in a martial arts program, although he never mentioned it during class [Teacher Interview, February 28, 2013]. He also spent a significant amount of time learning about history; he took particular interest in studying World War II. His teachers tried to capitalize on these interests in ways that helped support sustained participation in academic tasks. For instance, the second book club Liam read

Number the Stars (Lowry, 2011), a story about a Jewish family's struggles in escaping war-torn Nazi Germany, a topic Liam enjoyed reading about during his free time.

Liam was selected as a focal student because he was a highly active participant in the whole group setting (making 60 total contributions across the 5 months data were collected). His case highlights the ways in which his responses shaped conversations in a manner that added complexity and depth to discussions. Across both whole group and small group settings, Liam's turns at talk could be categorized as giving information and introducing arguments. When he contributed to discussions, he appeared to want to be seen as an expert. Often, this resulted in sharing information that he'd learned outside of the read-aloud or book club contexts. During conversations when Liam provided information, he drew on cited resources (e.g. television shows, things his parents had told him, books) that helped show how well-versed he was on the topic. Showing his intelligence was important for Liam, as he seemed to thrive on being positioned as an expert among the group.

Liam also acted as an agitator in the group. His contributions often resulted in a collaborative meaning-making session in response to his ideas. These arguments seemed to result in speakers treating topics more critically than may have been missed had Liam not contributed. When Liam questioned the text, he shared and defended his predictions and ideas and the group dynamics shifted from a sharing model in which students might give a one-sentence response to a sharing model in which students argued for and defended different viewpoints. Further, students drew on critical thinking skills to build and defend their own arguments and viewpoints in response to Liam's critical contributions. Thus, Liam's signature response patterns proved important in engaging students in arguments in ways that may not have been available without his presence. However, Liam's participation style was not readily appreciated by other students; hence, at times he was positioned socially in relation to the ways in which he participated in group conversations about books. This positioning seemed to happen most often in the small group setting, where students didn't have the teacher to help mediate meaning making sessions. When Liam was denied opportunities to

engage in his preferred way, he disengaged from conversations. Understanding the interactional approaches Liam takes as he engages in discussions of literature is important because it sheds light on the potential literature has as a transformative tool and demonstrates the complexities associated with discussions of literature.

## PERSPECTIVES

A complex network of factors related to social, emotional, and academic needs influence the choices students made in responding to literature within the classroom. Sociocultural theorists argue that cultural and historical experiences shape the ways in which an individual take on active roles within contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Further, Bakhtin (1981) argued that identities are not formed as isolated pieces of information that define the self; rather as discursive practices that are mediated by contextual factors such as group composition. He went on to suggest that to that individuals assume roles in order to position themselves in relation to others within particular settings. Thus, the behaviors one exhibits will change from setting to setting depending on an individual's perception of how others see them in that context as well as how they hope to be perceived. As individuals become familiar with the tacit rules of successful participation within contexts, they begin to agentively use language to communicate power and authority, so that they may inscribe status and influence (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1984).

Attempts at securing particular identity may be empowered or limited by particular cultural and historical resources related to the individual and the context in which he/she is embedded (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Thus, it can be argued that responses to literature are generated as reverberations of the interactive environment in which they are constructed (Almasi, 1995; Erickson, 2005; Sipe, 2008). Through this lens, many theorists and researchers have argued that these particular response types are context specific (e.g. Allen & Moller, 2009; Almasi, 1995; Erickson, 1995; Moje & Luke, 2009). However, other theorists posit that speech acts, such as public authoring in response to literature, are direct reflections of the internal interpretations of thought processes of individuals (Rosenblatt, 1938). This view of literature response argues that positional identities determine the

ways in which readers develop and express their “signature response patterns,” (Sipe, 2004) within and across literacy contexts, suggesting an element of stability as well.

In combining these two theoretical frames, it is possible to argue that when children are granted opportunities to experience and explore their preferential response styles, they are afforded opportunities to become more adept at those approaches to response; thus, furthering their developmental understandings of themselves as literate and social beings (Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers pay attention to students individual attempts at self-authoring in classroom settings, they may dually allow students to draw on their social experiences and cultural resources so that they may interact with texts in satisfying and ultimately transformational ways and create learning spaces where children might be afforded opportunities for the agency to construct their identities. Further, the exposition of multiple and varied approaches to responses within and across literacy contexts may serve as model for a range of response types, thus providing opportunities for students to expand their repertoires of response.

## METHODS

This study was designed as an embedded case study (Yin, 2009), which allowed for the investigation of multiple contexts (read-aloud and small group literature discussions) within one classroom setting. Embedded multiple case studies used two levels of sampling – that of the bounded system, and of the people, activities, and documents found within that system (Merriam, 2009). More clearly, this design provided a way to study systems within systems (Yin, 2009), which made visible individual experiences within larger contexts and allowed for comparative analysis between individual participants’ participation across the read-aloud and small group spaces. Findings from embedded case studies were reported from data collected on single cases within the larger context (Yin, 2009). The nature of the current study calls for thick description of individual experiences and response patterns within and across read-aloud and small group contexts in one classroom. Thus, this analysis focuses on a single embedded unit of analysis, a focal participant named Liam. To highlight the implications of Liam’s self-authoring

practices I provide multiple examples of his signature response patterns across the two group settings (whole group read-alouds and book clubs) on which data were collected.

Data was collected across an academic semester (from August to December) in a multi-age third/fourth grade classroom in an urban area in a large southwestern city. The classroom consisted of thirty-six students ranging in age from 8 -10 years. Classroom demographics included 21 boys, and 16 girls, one African American student, 17 Latino students, and 19 White students. The teachers provided students with a wide range of literacy contexts in which they are expected to explore and discuss literature.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Studies of various classroom contexts in which literature is discussed has led researchers to conclude that contextual factors influence the ways in which children respond to literature. This work has been important in helping teachers design contexts so that children have experiences with literature that may help them internalize skills and habits related to successful reading comprehension as well as acceptable social interactions with others. However, a growing body of evidence indicates there might also be stable parts of children’s identities that lead them to draw on signature patterns of response that are representative of their internal predispositions, and that shape the contexts in which the responses are being constructed (Sipe, 2004). This public authoring, acts as a way for students to claim identity status among group members, and allows students to gain footing as particular types of respondents, which may afford them particular positions in the class.

Further, research has demonstrated that active participation in classroom contexts where both tacit and explicit collaboration principles are enacted prepares children for successful participation in similar or related events (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). For instance, Anderson et al. (2000) demonstrated that as children engaged in small group discussions they acquired and appropriated strategies that made them successful discussants. The authors noted that as children became familiar with the impact of particular responses they repeatedly performed behaviors that were deemed successful (impactful, humorous, accepted by

the group, etc...), arguing that ways of thinking spread within and across groups. This work offers insight into Rogoff's (1995) conceptualization of participatory appropriation through which she argues participation as transformational in that individual actors are changed as a result of their participation in contexts. Further, participants may shift and change the nature of their participation based on tacit and explicit feedback he/she receives from the group.

In the high stakes curriculum climate that exists today, teachers are often reluctant to hand freedom of response over to students. Historically, teachers have relied on patterns of interaction that call students to respond to teacher-initiated questions in ways that teachers might evaluate for accuracy (Cazden, 2001). This dynamic leaves little room for them to experience and explore approaches to response that might further their identity development (Brown, 2005 citing Apple, 1999, Wells, 2001) and further limits the types of responses children might experience and try out for themselves. Thus, we know little about the ways in which self-authoring practices act in relation to tacit rules of participation in classrooms where teachers recognize and draw on students' individualized approaches to response as valid attempts at meaning-making.

Studying discussions of literature as forums where children might self author is important because it highlights how literature discussion contexts might be places where children actively try on and try out a variety of identities, and it highlights how teachers might support children's individualized attempts at meaning making so that discussions of literature might become transformational. The remainder of this paper explores the ways in which students in a multi-age (3rd/4th grade) classroom self authored as a means of gaining status and influence and the effects those self authoring practices had on the contexts in which they were enacted. The teachers in the classroom being studied were open to and supportive of a variety of self- authoring practices and actively participated in ways that helped students further recognize the power and influence their approaches to response might have.

## DATA SOURCES

Data sources include twenty-two video-

recorded read-aloud sessions that lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and forty-four audio-recorded small group sessions. In addition to collecting field notes, multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the data collection period. A formal interview was conducted at the duration of the data collection period with four of the small groups and with the teacher participants.

## ANALYSIS

Data analysis occurred in two phases. In the first phase, the researcher used the constant-comparative method (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method was inductive and comparative, and provided a systematic strategy for analyzing qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). Further, this method helped the researcher focus on deriving new meanings from the categorical aggregation of similar instances among a data set (Stake, 1995). The process called upon the researcher to use open coding to narrow and focus attention on the most meaningful units in relation to answering the research questions. These codes shaped the researcher's thinking so that meaning was drawn from a particular data set.

Open coding began as I reviewed field notes, transcripts of read-alouds and small groups, interviews, and artifacts as a comprehensive data set, and searched for themes that transcend data sources (Merriam, 2009). During this phase, I generated codes that described the nature of talk in particular episodes of discussion.

I also used a microanalysis of talk, to better understand how individual students constructed meaning with and around texts. To do this, I drew on traditions of interactive sociolinguistics (Cameron, 2001; Goffman, 2001; Gumperz, 1982; Schiffirn, 1995). Interactional sociolinguistics focused on the ways in which "language is situated in particular circumstances within social life, and how it adds to different types of meaning," (Schiffirn, 1994 p 7). Further, it recognizes the "presuppositions in terms of the content of what is said and what is decoded," (Gumperz, 1982, p 98). Typically, cues are habitually and automatically understood and used by social groups, however they are almost never consciously recognized. Thus, utterances communicate implicit definitions of the situation and how the content of the talk is meant to be understood. When contextual cues are

shared, interactions typically proceed smoothly. Viewing the response or reaction an utterance evokes provides evidence of whether interpretive conditions were shared (Shiffrin, 1992). Further, misunderstandings of contextualization cues can be problematic for people as they attempt to gain entrance into groups. For instance, in Liam was often ignored in the small group sessions because other children didn't understand his need and propensity for introducing arguments into the discussion, as arguments were a regular part of their discourse patterns.

Sociolinguistics provided a way for me to understand the ways in which focal students used language for specific purposes within group settings. By acknowledging underlying conditions that influence relationships between words, intentions and interactions, I was able to infer that the speaker's intent and desired outcome are connected to the relationship between words and the context in which they are spoken. Thus, the meaning, structure and use of language is socially and culturally relative. Understanding the function and interpretation of utterances is reliant upon what happens in response to individual contributions. The utterance either misfires or is accepted as the speaker intends. The use of interactional sociolinguistics is important because it helped highlight Liam's propensity for types of responses across settings.

## FINDINGS

The following analysis presents data on one student, Liam, a nine-year-old boy, within and across whole group read-aloud and small group book club contexts. The data below demonstrates Liam's interactional patterns across literacy contexts by highlighting the ways his signature response patterns manifested across the read-aloud and small group contexts. Liam was selected as a focal student because my inspection of the talk revealed him to be conversant who helped to shape conversations in a manner that added complexity and depth. Further, his case illustrates how students work to position themselves socially as a result of engaging in group conversations about books. Liam's contributions could be characterized as explanatory (introducing information), critical (analyzing elements of the text in divergent ways), and controversial. His contributions were important

for building his identity as someone who held a great deal of knowledge as well as because they sparked debate, which caused students to engage in critical discussions about texts.

## LIAM IN DISCUSSIONS

Liam was a frequent contributor in both read-aloud and small group settings. He raised his hand multiple times during each whole group reading session, and attempted to hold the floor for as long as possible. When he was called on, it was common for Liam to begin his contributions with "I have two things," which was often followed by an extended period of talk. During his turns, his speech was slow and deliberate, and to make sure that he was able to say everything he wanted to say he continued to talk over others who tried to interrupt him, even the teacher. Small groups were much less formal, which gave Liam the opportunity to speak without having to be called upon. Rather, when he wanted a turn at talk, it was common for him to raise the level of his voice so that his idea could be heard over others.

When Liam contributed to discussions, he used language that made him appear to be a critical expert on most subjects. Many times, this resulted in him sharing information that he had learned outside of the reading context. During episodes when Liam provided information, he drew cited resources that helped show that he was well versed in the topic. These citations ranged from things he had seen on TV, books he had read, and information he had gained from talking with his parents or life experiences. This was important for Liam, as he seemed to thrive on being positioned as an expert among the group.

## LIAM EXPLAINING

When Liam participated in the whole group setting, he often positioned himself as an expert regardless of the text being read-aloud, which allowed him to assert power and gain influence and authority in the whole group setting. His contributions typically allowed him to demonstrate that he held knowledge about a topic. It was common for Liam to support the information he delivered by reporting experiences and citing sources that helped him be viewed as an authority on the subject. Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky seemed to recognize the way Liam shared expertise was important to him; thus they made space for and

supported this approach to response by expressing various forms of validation. For instance, in the following example, the class discussed a scene in *Sadako* (Coerr, 1997) in which the main character, Sadako, expresses excitement about participating in a race in memory of those who died as a result of World War II's bombings, but becomes worried when she feels dizzy after practicing for the event. For fear that she would not be allowed to participate in the race, Sadako withholds this information from her family and teachers. Mrs. Mackendale stopped reading to model empathetic analysis by exploring Sadako's emotions as she experienced this unfamiliar feeling. As soon as Mrs. Mackendale finished talking, Liam raised his hand to add information that further contextualized the story.

Mrs. Mackendale: That must have been very scary. Liam?

Liam: Maybe it's... I watched a show, and if you're a baby when the atomic bomb drops on you, sometimes the effects can keep with you, so if you were old you could die from the atomic bomb, but if you were really young, you could get the effect when you were running, so maybe that is happening to her, and that sounds exactly like the effects of the atomic bomb.

Mrs. Mackendale: Interesting. Yeah, you know, typically with any type of sicknesses or things that are happening, the really, really young people, like babies, and the elderly are more susceptible, or more sensitive to get sick. So, I wonder if you are right, if the aftereffects of the atomic bomb affected her as a baby, and maybe now we're just seeing the effects of it. It's about 10 years later or so. [Sadako Transcript, December 10, 2012]

Here, Liam drew on an intertextual connection ("a show") to make an associative link between the story and information he knew. At the point in the text being discussed, the reader does not yet know that Sadako has cancer; thus, Liam's intertextual link acts as a prediction for what might happen next. He ended his contribution with a declarative statement, using the powerful word "exactly" to reinforce the strength of his prediction, further implicating his knowledge as accurate. Mrs. Mackendale validated his contribution by affirming that it was "interesting," which supported Liam's effort to appear knowledgeable, possibly encouraging Liam to contribute in similar ways in the future.

The following is a similar example, in that Liam took the floor immediately after the teacher finished talking, and used another source as a way to make his contribution seem more credible. In this excerpt, the students had listened to *The Always Prayer Shawl* (Oberman, 1997). The following conversation occurred after Mrs. Mackendale finished reading a page that described how Jewish refugees had to walk for extended periods of time in order to escape persecution.

Liam: I have two connections. One is that my dad's girlfriend, her great-great grandfather, in the 1800s, fought in the first revolution, and he lost, and he had to walk, and he escaped from a jail cell, and he had to walk from Siberia all the way to France he had to walk that journey, and then he finally got to the US and her family has been living in Virginia.

Mrs. Mackendale: Wow, thank you for sharing that.

Mia: I have a question for Liam. Do you know how many miles he walked?

Liam: I do not know how many miles he walked, but Siberia is a cold part of Russia, it's like so cold that no one can ever escape, and he walked from there to France.

Mia: Wow.

Liam: He probably stopped in France. [The Always Prayer Shawl Transcript, December 17, 2012]

This excerpt demonstrates two features of Liam's contributions during whole groups. First, he announced his presence in the conversation by establishing the amount of time he would spend talking ("I have two connections.") thus taking an authority position within the group. Compared to other students' turns at talk, this was an extended and lengthy contribution. Second, he drew another intertextual link between his knowledge and the story. He cited the source of the information that was to follow (his dad's girlfriend) in order to make the information he was sharing appear more relevant and accurate. Unlike the example above, Liam's link here seemed to be an attempt at personalizing the story as well as adding information that might help contextualize events for other students. When Mia prompted Liam to continue talking, she dually supported the deepening of comprehension of the narrative being constructed both by the text and by Liam, as well reinforcing Liam's identity as an

expert on his topic and providing him with the space to continue talking.

### **EXPLAINING IN BOOK CLUBS**

During the five months of data collection Liam participated in two book clubs. The first met for a week at the end of October to discuss scary stories. This group was comprised of Kelly, Carla, and Zachary, and they typically stayed at Liam's table in the classroom when they were discussing stories. This group was fairly functional in terms of their willingness to discuss stories, though Kelly often took on the role of the "teacher" in the group, redirecting them when they strayed from the task at hand.

Liam's second book club met for two weeks in November to discuss Number the Stars (Lowery, 2011), a story told through the eyes of a ten-year-old girl, Annemarie, detailing the Danish resistance during World War II. This group was comprised of Ryan, Audrey, and Carter. They typically met on the carpet at the front of Ms. Sadowsky's side of the room. The text was selected based on children's interest and reading level. The first book club was fairly functional in terms of discussing the text, however Liam's contributions seemed less valued in this second group. In small groups, like in whole groups, when other students had questions about anything in the story, Liam was typically the first one to provide information. For instance, the following generated when Liam's first small group read a story in which a pair of ghost hunters trying to capture the image of a female spirit who haunted a popular hotel. The story took place in England, a location that Liam felt he knew a lot about because his mother is British [Field Notes/ Transcript of Read-aloud of Matilda, October, 1, 2012]. In this excerpt, Carla expressed confusion about the photographers' motivation to take a picture of the ghost. Liam joined the conversation in an attempt to clear up Carla's confusion, but extended his contribution by adding extra information related to the topic.

Liam: Carla, the reason is that in England, I should know this cause my mom told me since she lived in England. She told me that a lot of people were crazy back in a few day, back in a few day, back in the 17 and 18 centuries, people were all like coo-coo (Carla giggles) they would always be like, there's a ghost, so they would always try to find

ghosts and stuff...

In this example, Liam positioned himself as an expert in the group. Just like in his contributions in read-alouds, he qualified his knowledge by citing a source (his mom) as the root of this information. He began his contribution by suggesting there was one reason for people to chase ghosts, and that he was going to share "the reason." His explanation launched into a connected narrative that answered Carla's question, positioning the information as nonfiction even though the text was earlier identified by the class as fictional.

The students in Liam's first book club encouraged him to share, allowing him to take the floor more often than other students. His status as an expert was validated and his contributions remained productive. However, the members of Liam's second book club were less willing to accept him as an expert in the group. In this group, Liam had to compete with Ryan, a Jewish classmate, for the title of expert. Ryan was often positioned as more knowledgeable than Liam because he was Jewish and was seen as having more information about the events of Jewish the persecution during World War II. This frustrated Liam, because even though he was not Jewish, he read about World War II extensively. On many occasions, Liam and Ryan engaged in a power struggle over who would be allowed to hold the floor to explain what was happening. At times, this resulted in them talking over one another and Liam becoming frustrated and eventually disengaging.

The following excerpt illustrates one instance where Liam and Ryan engaged in a power struggle as Liam attempted to provide information to the group. Much like the example above, this conversation began when a student asked a question about something in the story and Liam attempted to answer. In this case, the group read a passage where the main character contemplated wearing a Jewish symbol that would identify her to the Nazi troops, who were hunting for people to take to concentration camps. Audrey asked the group what the Star of David means as a Jewish symbol. Liam attempted to answer first, but was cut off by Audrey who positioned Ryan as the expert in the group because "he's Jewish."

Audrey: What is the Star of David?

Liam: The Star of David is...

Audrey: Wait – he's Jewish, he can tell us.

Ryan: Liam, hand me the pencil.

Liam: Does it look like this? Like a triangle?

Ryan: Like a triangle and another triangle. It's like this.

Liam: It's like a Jewish symbol.

Ryan: (Drawing) It's one triangle and then another. It has six points.

In this example, Liam attempted to take the floor first, but Audrey overtly positioned Ryan as a person who held more knowledge than Liam about this particular subject. Liam continued to add information despite Audrey's attempt to give the floor to Ryan. In this example, Liam didn't follow his typical pattern of citing how he knew what he was sharing, rather just shared individual pieces of information quickly. Over the two weeks this group met, the pattern of positioning Ryan over Liam repeated. In their next meeting, Audrey asks another question and similarly silenced Liam in order to give the floor to Ryan.

Audrey: What's the Holocaust?

Ryan: The Holocaust was...

Liam: The Holocaust was (loudly speaking over Ryan)

Ryan: Let me explain.

Audrey: Liam, put this down and let him explain.

Liam: Ryan.

Ryan: The Holocaust was during World War II, Hitler hated Jews where he had this thing for the whole war, so what he did was he sent out all his soldiers, to get all the Jews and they would take them to these concentration camps and that's where they would torture them.

Liam: That's where they would he would also, there was also like kid Jews, in this book they are hiding a Jew, and they use to have these Nazis.

Audrey: Okay, well.

Liam: And they would send them to concentration camps and also go into their houses and just shoot them.

Audrey: Okay, now continue (to Ryan).

Ryan: Okay, so during the Holocaust, to identify the Jews for the Nazi soldiers, they had to wear the Star of David, and it was yellow and it said Jew, that's the Dutch word for Jew, Jud. It's actually spelled Jude.

In this excerpt, Liam attempted to get the floor first by raising his voice and speaking over the other

group members. Liam conceded, allowing Ryan to talk, however he took the opportunity to add information as soon as there was an opening, and tried again to position himself as holding a special kind of knowledge by citing "this book." When he finished speaking, Audrey, almost dismissively, turned to Ryan giving him back the floor.

As the book club went on, Liam continued to be positioned as less knowledgeable than Ryan, but that didn't stop him from trying to dominate conversations. Eventually, the other group members became frustrated with Liam, and began to call his expertise into question. The following example highlights this pattern. This example was generated while the group discussed a scene in which Nazi soldiers found a piece of clothing from Annemarie and her family that was being used to help scent tracking dogs find the family.

Audrey: How do they make the handkerchiefs that the dogs smelled.

Ryan: I bet they put the chemical inside,

Audrey: Yeah, but I'm asking what the chemical is.

Liam: The chemical is this stuff called hydrodoxin (sic), it's like this very rare chemical that people like put into stuff, and

Audrey: Why are you pretending you know about that?

In this example, Audrey directly challenged Liam's attempt to answer her question. She positioned him as not knowing what he was talking about, and attacked this feature of his participation style. Being questioned in this way was frustrating to Liam, which was evident in the way his face flushed and he fell silent after Audrey spoke [Field Notes, November 13, 2012]. After this episode, Liam's participation in the group changed. Instead of trying to jump in and explain things, his contributions were more distracting and disengaged in nature. In the last few book club meetings, it was common to find Liam rolling around on the floor, falling out of his chair, making machine gun noises, making inappropriate comments and laughing randomly as others shared. Liam's disengagement here and in the examples above when Ryan was granted the floor, provide evidence that he was startled by her response, and did not have the coping mechanisms necessary to engage when his authority was challenged.

## OFFERING CRITICISM

Liam's also contributed to read-alouds by offering analytical criticisms of texts and other students' ideas. He consistently analyzed text sequences and story lines, arguing issues of relevance and accuracy. Liam's criticisms were often made in relation to some indeterminacy or inaccuracy in texts that resulted in characters engaging in impossible scenarios. It was common during these episodes for other discussants to join into conversation in equally critical ways, engaging in chains of speculative reasoning (Sipe, 2008). When challenged, Liam tended to defend his original position by providing more evidence that his interpretation was correct, without considering alternate viewpoints. It became evident that his unwillingness to accept others' viewpoints seemed to be an attempt at maintaining his position as an expert. However, the defense of his ideas demonstrated that Liam could successfully construct and defend an argument, as well as illustrated Liam's deep understanding of narrative structures, calling into question when plot sequences didn't fit the expectations of particular genres.

The following talk was generated at the conclusion of a read-aloud about a ghost who haunts the beach, searching for a hook-hand he'd lost at the time of his burial. This example highlights the pattern of talk Liam used to initiate the conversation by challenging a text, which sparked a critical conversation in which children considered the value and truth of the text. As the story came to a close, Liam leaned forward with a straight spine, rigid elbow, and his gaze locked on the student teacher, Ms. Ramirez, to expose a flaw in the plotline:

Liam: This could happen, maybe, some people, what I think, there are two things. What I think is that this story doesn't really make sense because gold is pretty heavy, right? The waves would push it all in, it would be stuck somewhere down there, so people would have to be living there for so long, why hadn't someone just gone fishing and fished it up? That would have been totally likely. And also it would only be, like let's say this would be the waves, this would be the beach (modeling with his hands), it would only be like right here, or right here, and the waves, over time, it would have either gone down, and people would have hooked it up,

or the waves would have pushed it up, so I don't see how he could have lost it for that much time, without someone finding it. 'Cause if it were just right there someone would see it and they would grab it, and then take it back to the house, then take it to the burial...

Ms. Ramirez: Very interesting.

Liam: ...but someone would fish it, but it's been there so, more than 100 years, why didn't someone see it and pick it up, or go fish it and have it?

Student: Because it's at the bottom of the sea.

Ms. Ramirez: That's a good question....

Liam: If it were at the bottom of the sea, it would have gone there slowly, a century, I'd say in about, estimating about a century and three years or something, it would have just gone down, the waves would have just pushed it down, let's say that this is the sea level, and this was the bottom, like right here or something (demonstrating with his hands), I don't see how somebody couldn't have just gone, just walking randomly, oh what's that shiny thing, and picked it up, and then took it to the burial. [By Hook or by Crook Transcript, October 25, 2012]

Liam initially couched his contribution as a tentative suggestion (this could happen), which he quickly changed into an evaluation of the plot (the story doesn't really make sense). His words challenged the credibility of an essential detail that undermined the plot structure. Here, he demonstrated understanding that his criticism of the text required supported analysis; thus, he drew on understanding of how waves carry objects out to sea as well as the rise and fall of sea levels to make a case about the implausibility of the story. He maintained the floor for several turns, reiterating his points, seeming to recognize that his criticism may be met by equally critical analysis and that his point may not be understood. In fact, as this conversation continued, other students collaborated or challenged Liam's analysis, resulting in an argument that spoke back to Liam's ideas.

Jessica: The waves probably moved it... (inaudible).

Liam: Gold is heavy, so it wouldn't necessarily budge.

Ms. Ramirez: I know, so it would sink down to the bottom is what you're saying.

Liam: It would sink down a little bit, but then there's solid rocks, and it would probably get caught,

then the waves would come back, and somebody would have seen it, the glitter of it, and picked it up.

Ms. Ramirez: Yes, I hear what you're saying. That's a really good observation Liam. You really read into how that worked. Jason?

Jason: Well, I just have an explanation for that. One thing, I don't think that someone would have that much money to buy a real gold hook. Two, even if it were gold, the sand would have just covered it, and it would sink way down.

Ms. Ramirez: Ok, that's really interesting. I wonder if the captain was looking in the right place? Noah?

Noah: If someone did find it, I think they would be too scared to visit the house, because his ghost would be there.

Ms. Ramirez: Yeah, I wonder if someone had it, would the captain haunt him or her? Melissa?

Melissa: This is kinda another explanation for Liam's comment. I think, because you think they would find it, because they would see it, I think it would sink to the bottom after 25 years like that.

Liam: I know, but if it were real gold—

Student: It wasn't real gold.

Liam: I know, but if it sunk to the bottom—

Ms. Ramirez: Hey Liam, I'm going to interrupt you, everyone understands what Liam's point is, he's wondering why no one has found it, we've discussed that. Jackson? Adam?

Adam: If the hook were actually real gold it probably wouldn't be able to wash into the sand unless the waves were really strong, and if it were just painted gold, the paint would have just washed off by now. So they wouldn't really know.

Ms. Ramirez: Yeah, so maybe they didn't know. Alex?

Alex: I have another reason why the hook may go further out to sea, or two. It would have to be hollow so you can stick the hand in there, so it wouldn't be that heavy. And two, it would depend on which way it fell. If it fell with the hollow side down it would float, even if it were real gold, because the air in there could be displaced by the water below. [By Hook or by Crook Transcript, October 25, 2012]

Unlike the Sadako example, the claims Liam made here were not supported by another source of information (though he drew on his own background). Thus, presenting this argument initiated a collaborative reasoning session in which students worked to see if they could make

any scientific sense out of the plot. Indeed, other students presented alternative possibilities that both supported and countered Liam's justification for being dissatisfied. The linked chain of hypothesis resulting from Liam's initial analytic evaluation demonstrates the amount of interpretive energy students spent in attempting to come to shared understandings of texts.

As this conversation wore on, it became evident that students became frustrated (rolling eyes, slouched posture, raised voices) with Liam's unwillingness to consider others' ideas, as many of them were seen rolling their eyes around and letting out audible sighs. However, his contribution was important because it sparked a critical, thoughtful discussion of an essential detail of the plot, resulting in the group drawing on their own critical thinking skills to collaboratively problem-solve. Further, this episode lasted a total of 6 minutes and 27 seconds and engaged nine total students, many of whom rarely spoke during whole group sessions (e.g., Adam). Reznitskaya and Anderson (2009) (among others) have shown that opportunities for students to orally engage in collaborative meaning-making sessions and arguments like the ones above translate into other contexts in which logical reasoning is valued. Thus, Liam's introduction of arguments here was important in that he provided a venue in which individual students might become more proficient in formulating and presenting arguments.

Liam also offered criticism in the form of evaluating character behavior or making suggestions about what might have made for a better story. For instance, the following example came from an episode in which the class discussed a scene in Chocolate Fever (Smith, 1972) in which the main character, Henry, has run away from home because he feels he has become a burden to his family. Ms. Sadowsky stopped at a point in the text that describes Henry's internal plan about how he will survive his first night away from home. The author describes Henry's fears about not being able to find food or a safe place to sleep, allowing Ms. Sadowsky to step in and express worry about Henry. Liam entered the conversation not to echo or predict as many other students did. Rather, Liam responded to Ms. Sadowsky's suggestion of worry by providing a scenario that might lead to Henry's safety:

Ms. Sadowsky: Yeah, I'm really worried about

that, too. Jackson was saying that he's got to go somewhere that he knows someone to get some food, and something to drink. How would you get that? Mia?

Mia: I think that he just went to school to get something that he left there.

Ms. Sadowsky: Ok, maybe. Maybe he left his snack under the bridge. Liam?

Liam: A good idea that he could do, is he could probably stay there for a few days, it's very easy. All you have to do is go into a store, and hide there until they lock up at night, and steal things, eat it, and then when they walk back in hide again, and then you can just eat there. [Transcript of Chocolate Fever Read-Aloud, September 21, 2012].

Liam drew on a personalizing impulse in this example, drawing the story world out into his own (Sipe, 2008). He viewed Henry's situation from an objective, third person observer position (Langer, 1990) in which he creatively altered the story, giving Henry a solution that might solve his homelessness. Sipe (2008) argues that this type of personal response acts as the basis for more developed and sophisticated literary understandings in which readers consider the implications texts have for their own lives. Liam posed possible solutions to Henry's problem; thus demonstrating an initial understanding that the story world is negotiable. He positioned himself as a capable, and perhaps more adept author, as he suggested a solution to a problem highlighted by the actual composer of the story. This contribution also seemed to act as a tentative prediction in that Liam's idea that his solution is something that Henry "could do."

As the conversation continued, Ms. Sadowsky honored Liam's powerful meaning-making, and tried to make it even stronger and more logical by providing both challenge and time. Thus, here in the presence of the whole group, Mrs. Sadowsky provided Liam with the opportunity and space to continue to think and build his argument, which satisfied the identity position he took up in the read-aloud context.

Ms. Sadowsky: I would imagine that you might set off some alarms, because most stores have alarms, but I guess it would be possible.

Liam: But if they go overnight, they don't detect them.

Ms. Sadowsky: Yeah, but they have an alarm on inside the school.

Liam: Yeah, but they have an alarm for someone to come in.

Ms. Sadowsky: They have motion detectors inside. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. Inside of Meadowbrook, if you come in on the weekend, there's an alarm on the school, so it will go off if you come into the building. You have to turn the alarm off. If you are inside the building, like if I'm in this classroom, and someone set the alarm out front because they think everyone's gone, and I'm walking around, I'll set the alarm off. It's the motion detectors. The alarm can sense movement, so it will still trigger the alarm, even though I didn't open an outside door, I could just be walking around in the classroom.

Liam: But, if he walks around before the alarm, and finds the alarm, and turns it off, and then he could run up and do it, and he'd be like, oh, false alarm.

Ms. Sadowsky: Sure, could be, I guess you never know, anything is possible. Ok, we need to continue on chapter 7 [Transcript of Chocolate Fever, September 21, 2012].

Ms. Sadowsky made space for Liam to develop and construct an argument. She played the role of an opponent, modeling the social features of arguments and providing background knowledge that might dually inform Liam's argument and support her position. Indeed, as Liam encountered and processed the information Ms. Sadowsky shared, he changed his argument to accommodate his growing schema of the inner workings of security systems. This transaction between Ms. Sadowsky, Liam, and the text modeled the ways in which texts act as malleable narratives that are subject to re-authoring (Sipe, 2008). Further, Ms. Sadowsky took this opportunity to model the ways in which discussants engage in productive discussions by supporting arguments, providing the class opportunities to add to their conversational repertoires (Lysaker, 2006).

Although this participation style did seem to frustrate other participants at times, Liam's role as a critic was important because it sparked collaborative reasoning that caused students and teachers to think in divergent ways. For instance, in the example from the ghost story above, Liam's commitment to having others agree with his assessment of the story introduced an argument that caused other students to draw on their own

reasoning skills (e.g. providing counterclaims with supporting evidence). Similarly, in the example from Chocolate Fever, Liam's argument created an opportunity for Ms. Sadowsky to model an argumentation style that was not typical of the read-aloud setting. As she made claims that challenged Liam's idea, she offered specific evidence that supported her assertion. Liam's contributions here added a layer of complexity to discussions that resulted in extended collaborative meaning-making episodes as well as exercise skills in argumentation.

Liam's critical contributions were important because they appeared to instigate collaborative meaning-making sessions in which students supported their ideas with additional reasoning. Rezniskaya and Anderson (2009) argue that the opportunity to engage in collaborative argumentation exposes children to the social features of arguments (e.g. reasons, grounds, warrants, backing, modifiers, counterarguments, and rebuttals), which may later become internalized as procedural approaches to texts. The researchers argue that the acquisition of an epistemological orientation towards arguments orients children toward developing commitments to use reasoned discourse for exploring complex issues. Further, students adept in argumentation strategies are more likely to generate relevant propositions, consider alternatives, and reconcile opposing perspectives. Thus, Liam's role as critic in the large group facilitated other children's moves beyond simplified interpretations of texts and seemed to help them consider multiple and varied approaches to interpretation. The following set of excerpts exemplifies Liam's critical approaches to texts, highlighting the ways in which his contributions facilitated collaborative meaning-making sessions.

By allowing space for students to respond to text by drawing on their own lives and conceptual understandings, Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky created an environment in which students were allowed to experience various approaches to response, which supported and extended their reading development (Lysaker, 2006; Panteleo, 2007; Wiseman, 2011). Throughout the read-alouds, Liam was validated as someone who held a lot of knowledge about events in stories; thus, providing him the opportunity to author himself as a critical expert, a position that was satisfying to him. This continued support encouraged Liam to continue

to contribute in ways that engaged other students in constructing meaning in response to texts. Thus, through conversations, Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky encouraged Liam to build his knowledge and interpretations of texts in ways that were meaningful to him, which ultimately resulted other students being provided opportunities to engage with texts in new and transformative ways.

### **CRITICAL ANALYSIS IN SMALL GROUPS**

Another role Liam took on during the small group was that of a person who asked provocative questions. Much like his critical approaches to texts during whole group sessions, Liam used these questions to help extend and connect narratives to the real world, causing students to discuss and think about things they might not have previously. At times, these questions were disturbing to the group, resulting in highly emotional reactions. For instance, in the following example, Liam asked a question that called his group members to imagine themselves in a situation that was ethically complex. Just before he asked the question, the group had read a passage describing soldiers in Nazi Germany entering a Jewish family's house to look for clues about their current location, not realizing that they were hiding, undetected, in the home being searched. The author depicted Nazi soldiers as individuals who had no choice in deciding how they proceeded, but as people who follow orders directly.

Liam: If you were the soldiers, would you search Ann Marie's (sic) house?

Audrey: No because I would have no, absolutely no idea what to look for.

Ryan: I'd check because I was ordered.

Alice: And besides, anyway, it just looked like there was nobody there.

Liam: What would you [do] if you found them?

Ryan: If I were a soldier?

Liam: Yeah. Would you kill them?

Ryan: I'd take them to a concentration camp? Just take them to a

concentration camp. [Number the Stars Transcript, November 6, 2012]

Liam initiated this conversation with a broad but complicated question, asking students to place themselves directly into the center of a moral and ethical dilemma in the text. This question dually prompted students to objectify the experiences

of the book's adversaries, a position not often considered in either whole group or small group settings. Likely, Liam's background knowledge of the events of World War II resulted in focused attention on these pivotal characters who held the potential to change the course of the story entirely. Further, this probe asked students to step in and change the story in ways that might have held implications for the historical outcomes of the events of World War II, about which Liam held extent knowledge. Sipe (2000; 2008) among others (e.g. Greene, 2005; Langer, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1995; 1938) argues that objective but transparent responses demonstrate the complexity involved in reconciling the implications texts might have on students' lives or conceptions of the human condition.

Liam's initial question was met by resistance when Audrey and Ryan, who offered answers closely guided by the characterization of the Nazi soldiers as mindless followers of the Nazi mission, despite his identity as a Jewish student. Thus, he continued to dig into the moral and ethical dilemmas associated with being a soldier: killing people because of their religious affiliations and obeying orders as a member of the military. Ryan distanced himself from Liam's question by clarifying that he'd answered from the perspective of a soldier, not from his own moral and ethical position. Perhaps Ryan's need to make clear that he was playing a role in saying that he would take the characters to a concentration camp was related to his status as Jewish. This example illustrates how Liam's provocative questions enabled the other students to place themselves in the circumstances of characters, including those who were not main characters or heroes. These instances added complexity to the story discussions by asking students to analyze crucial moments in the text from multiple viewpoints.

The following is a similar example in which Liam asked the small group to consider if suicide would be an option had they been a Jewish person captured by the Nazi regime. Again, Liam called students consider responses that extended beyond basic comprehension, by asking them to reconcile quality of life issues as they related to the description of treatment of people admitted into concentration camps. Just before this question, the Jewish protagonists were being closed in upon

by soldiers. Liam took the opportunity to imagine them being caught, creating the space for the group to ponder options.

Liam: If you knew the soldiers were coming, would you commit suicide?

Audrey: NO!

Ryan: No.

Audrey: I never would commit suicide.

Liam: I mean, like, shoot yourself.

Audrey: I know what suicide is, and I would never do it.

Ryan: But if you did commit suicide, and it ended up being someone else ended up being in the place you were got caught, I guess yeah, is there a better choice?

Liam: It's a bad choice is getting captured and your friends knowing that you died in a concentration camp and it's really sad if you shot yourself [Number the Stars Transcript, November 5, 2012]

In this example, Liam engaged the group in critically considering how quality of life might be affected if they were forced to live under the horrific conditions of concentration camps described by the author. Audrey answered with a very quick and deliberate tone, almost sounding shocked or offended by the nature of the question. Ryan joined the conversation initially echoing Audrey's assertion that suicide might not be an option, but then began to explore the complicated nature of the situation. Thus, Ryan took the opportunity to critically think about what Liam was asking, specifically drawing attention to the notion that dying in a concentration camp might be worse than suicide.

In small groups, Liam drew on his knowledge of the world to help qualify his explanations and built alignment with other students as he supported claims he made. He also acted as a participant who posed provocative questions that called students to question moral and ethical issues in relation to texts. In instances in which he was positioned as less of an expert than another group member, he disengaged with the content or disrupted the group through inappropriate behavior. Liam didn't resort to such measures in the whole group because his ideas were responded to in positive and validating ways. It seems as though Liam's meaning-making ability was limited in the small group because other group members denied him opportunities to

participate in ways that were satisfying.

In addition to providing information in small groups, Liam acted as a person who hoped to complicate narratives in ways that made students think about moral and ethical dilemmas. He responded to narratives in personal ways, asking “what would you do” style questions that called for objectification of narrative elements allowing him and others to consider the implications stories had for their lives. Upon receiving answers to his questions, Liam probed the responses in ways similar to the ways in which his teachers did in the whole group setting. These probes seemed to result in students considering scenarios from different points of view and specifically through the eyes of the characters.

## CONCLUSIONS

Liam’s case illustrates the ways in which students used language to help them gain footing socially as a result of engaging in group conversations about books. Central to the findings is the notion that while there are differences in approaches to response, some stability related to individual identities exists. Further, responses are constructed in particular linguistic styles that communicate particular identity configurations. Although he was a controversial participant in both whole and small groups, Liam’s contributions demonstrated advanced literary understandings, extracting textual scenarios in ways that allowed him to consider the implications the story world had for his own life. Although some of his classmates seemed frustrated with him, Liam’s contributions in both contexts were important. The ways in which he questioned texts added complexity to the conversations, drawing students’ attention to various features of text. In both contexts, Liam asked his classmates to consider moral and ethical dilemmas in ways that extended the story, calling students to consider the possibility that the story world could happen in their own lives. Further, by responding critically to texts, Liam acted in a way that communicated a desire to “think about this,” and added complexity to conversations. Though his style made students in both contexts uncomfortable, the questions were important in that they acted as a catalyst that moved individual and collective thinking beyond basic comprehension of story. In the whole group setting, this approach seemed to

be welcomed and valid, as it was supported by both teachers and other students. When asked about his contributions, Ms. Sadowsky suggested that, “He does like to argue, but his contributions invite students to have conversations they may not have previously had” [Teacher Interview, April 28, 2013]. However, in small group settings, students didn’t recognize the value in this type of engagement, resulting in them avoiding interacting with Liam in reading and social contexts.

Based on findings from these studies, one might have expected to see responses change depending on the context in which they are constructed. While discussion contexts change (group size) the context of the classroom is the same. While it was true that Liam’s approach to responses was different (e.g. He was more willing to use colloquial language and played with ideas more), the deep structure and function of response patterns remained relatively stable across groups. Specifically, in the whole group responses to his questions and ideas were mediated by the teacher, which caused students to either soften their responses to him or to avoid responding to him altogether. In small groups, responding to Liam was unavoidable and sometimes led to conflict, particularly when students didn’t understand his questions or didn’t want to argue with him. It is important to note, particularly with his participation in the second small group with Audrey, that Liam’s potential for productive contributions was diminished when his ideas weren’t validated or were challenged in ways that didn’t allow for arguments to form. This data also demonstrates that perhaps there is value in teaching children how to navigate situations in which their ideas are not necessarily popular in positive and productive ways.

Sociocultural theorists have long suggested that group composition affects the ways in which students interact within collaborative settings (Gee, 1999, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Maloch, 2005). Lewis (2001) argued that students with more social status in class tend to dominate conversations, marginalizing the voices of students who are less vocal, resulting in them missing out on the benefits of discussion. In Liam’s case, it was not his wish to speak that denied him access to discussions; rather, it was because the position he assigned himself was that of a critical expert, which seemed to annoy some of his classmates. When students

confronted Liam by directly calling his expertise into question, he acted out in ways that indicated disengagement. His participation in the second small group with Audrey demonstrated the ways in which his potential for productive contributions was diminished when his ideas weren't validated or were challenged in ways that didn't allow for arguments to form. Thus, Liam and the group members from his second book club appear to have missed out on the benefits of Liam's critical and provocative contributions because they either didn't see the value in his approaches to response or were unsure how to navigate such controversial topics. Hence, the classroom might be a place where teachers scaffold both children's approaches to response as well as their ability to navigate and engage in critical conversations that are sparked by peers' contributions.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research adds to research on the nature of identity construction within classroom spaces and in contexts where response to literature is expected. While the contexts affected the language of response, Liam's propensity to respond in particular ways remained stable. Further, this research demonstrates the ways in which children establish stable parts of their identities within and across contexts developed for responses to literature. Despite variation in group composition and texts within and between contexts, Liam displayed a constellation of responses that his signature response pattern (Sipe, 2008), in which Liam presented himself as a critical expert.

It became apparent that the contexts in which literature was shared were constructed as complex communities in which students composed themselves as particular kinds of responders through deliberate contributions to conversations. Bakhtin (1981) argues that learning differences in ways of responding allows for individual to become more plentiful composers, able to diversify their social voices in ways that build complexity of perspectives within one's own ideas. When Liam shared in group settings the students were engaged in arguments that may not have been present without his contribution. Students often startled Liam with unanticipated responses (e.g., not directly accepting his statements as true), which provided information about how particular

response types were received and interpreted. Thus, participation in both contexts provided Liam the opportunity to learn how his contributions were received meaning that both whole and small group contexts were important in providing Liam the opportunity to understand his positionality across contexts. Further, the opportunity to participate in both whole and small groups situated Liam so that he was able to purposefully craft contributions so that they were impactful across settings.

In conclusion, providing multiple literature discussion contexts seems purposeful in offering students spaces where they might work through basic comprehension questions related to texts as well as creating spaces where students learn how interactions with others are mediated by cultural, contextual factors. Thus, it seems important to offer children a variety of spaces in which they might discuss literature across the school day.

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